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ABSTRACT

Demographic and institutional factors responsible for the large variations of student retention and achievement at further education (FE) colleges throughout the United Kingdom were examined. Data from individualized student records were analyzed, and 10 FE colleges identified as serving areas of deprivation were visited to assess the extent to which demographic factors are the main determinants of differences in rates of retention and achievement and to identify institutional practices connected with higher and lower retention and achievement. Although demographic differences in student profiles had an impact on the relative rates of achievement recorded by different colleges, demographic make-up of student bodies did not appear to explain the major part of interinstitutional variations in achievement. A substantial part of the achievement gap appeared to stem from factors lying within the direct influence of FE colleges. A total of 53 key characteristics associated with effective interventions to raise student achievement were identified. The characteristics involved the following aspects of practice: strategic commitment; collegewide approaches; recruitment, placement, and induction; design and delivery of curriculum;

tutorial and other support; teaching and pedagogy; and monitoring, evaluation, and follow-up. It was concluded that more work is required to determine how demographic factors act as barriers to achievement. (Contains 12 references.) (MN)

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# Closins the achievement gap

## colleges making a difference

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Peter Davies

# **Closing the achievement gap: colleges making a difference**

**Report of research project  
undertaken by the  
Learning and Skills Development Agency**

**by**

**Peter Davies**

**May 2001**

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**Note:** The Learning and Skills Development Agency has been referred to using its former name, FEDA, throughout this publication.

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research project that this report concerns was undertaken as part of the *Raising Quality and Achievement* programme, and sponsored by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). Work on the project commenced in February 2000.

The report aims to clarify the relative influence on student achievement of institutional performance and of demographic factors, and to guide colleges on effective strategies to raise achievement. Its contents are devoted primarily to the findings arising from the second stage of the project, during which the Agency's consultants visited a sample of colleges with a range of achievement rates. It also contains a brief summary of the outcomes of the first stage of the project, which investigated the extent to which inter-institutional differences in FE-sector achievement rates can be explained by relative differences in the profiles of enrolled students, as recorded in the Further Education Funding Council's (FEFC's) Individualised Student Record (ISR). For full details of the Stage 1 findings, readers are referred to *Differential achievement: what does the ISR profile tell us?* (Davies and Rudden 2000).

In undertaking this work, the Learning and Skills Development Agency acknowledges the considerable assistance received from the managements and staff of the participating colleges, the FEFC, and the Responsive College Unit (RCU), without which this report would not have been possible.

### **Project team**

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## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

### Demographic influences on achievement

- Demographic differences in student profiles have an impact on the relative rates of student achievement recorded by different colleges. Generally speaking, there is a negative correlation between measures of deprivation and overall rates of achievement.
- In itself the demographic make-up of student bodies does *not* appear to be capable of explaining the major part of inter-institutional variations in achievement. Colleges with the lowest rates of student achievement are below average primarily because their rates are lower for *all* types of student, not because they have higher than average proportions in categories associated with below average achievement – even though the latter is usually also the case.
- Once variations in the Individualised Student Record (ISR) profiles have been accounted for, there is no evidence that the remaining differences in college achievement rates are connected in any marked degree to variations in students' prior attainments, or in the numbers of qualifications for which they are entered.
- Initial analysis of student bodies by postcode reveals no evidence that deprivation has a significant impact on achievement over and above that revealed by ISR comparisons. For every additional 10% of total student numbers from deprived areas, overall achievement rates fall by around 3% (1997–98 data) or less (1998–99). This relationship between achievement rates and the percentages of students from deprived areas is relatively weak. Even if the correlation were strong, it would not account for the bulk of the inter-institutional achievement gap.
- Demographic variations appear to account at most for no more than half of the inter-institutional differences in student achievement, according to the measures currently available. *All* colleges with overall achievement rates below the average should be capable of improving them to the current median level, at the very least. Further investigations of the influences of deprivation and ethnicity are needed before we can fully exclude the possibility that they could explain a significant further element of the remaining achievement gap.

### Institutional performance

- A substantial part of the achievement gap appears to stem from factors that lie within the direct influence of colleges – that is, as a result of differences in institutional ethos, systems, procedures and practices that affect student performance. Evidence already assembled concerning influences on student retention, together with the reports from the FEFC Inspectorate, and from the National Audit Office, supports this hypothesis.
- Colleges with low achievement rates are not confined to those serving areas of high deprivation. Year-on-year improvements have generally been most

pronounced among the colleges with the lower achievement rates – a pattern consistent with the hypothesis that a significant element of student achievement is directly susceptible to college-level interventions.

- Our study of 10 colleges that formed Stage 2 of this project suggests that, in general and taking account of the variations in the profiles of the student bodies, those with the better performance in terms of overall achievement rates during the period 1996–99 had for whatever reason made the improvement of retention and achievement a major strategic priority at an earlier stage and had been more successful at embedding a culture of continual improvement at all levels. In these cases there was evidence extending over a longer period of:
  - the high priority accorded to raising student achievement within the college strategic plan
  - consideration of the issue by the SMT and governing body
  - the establishment of achievement targets, against which progress was monitored, and the use of benchmarks
  - effective communication to staff of the central importance of raising student achievement
  - a culture of high expectations of both staff and students
  - the allocation of responsibility and authority at curriculum leader and course team level
  - regular monitoring and action-planning via face-to-face meetings between managers and staff
  - encouragement of bottom-up initiatives within a college-wide strategy framework
  - review of teacher performance, supported by tailored staff development.
- A number of the most interesting innovations are now in place in colleges with the greatest cause for concern about their achievement rates.

## Raising student achievement

- Key characteristics associated with effective interventions to raise student achievement were identified as:

### ***Strategic commitment***

- a clear commitment at SMT and governing body level to the importance of delivering and sustaining high levels of student achievement
- the establishment of clear, challenging but realistic achievement targets, against which progress can be monitored
- effective communication to college staff of the importance accorded to student achievement, and to the associated targets
- a culture of continual improvement, underpinned by clear accountabilities.
- an embedded belief that the college could make a significant difference to student achievement, even allowing for the influences of demographic factors outside its direct control.

### **College-wide approaches**

- annual course review and self-assessment procedures, with the active involvement of curriculum leaders and course teams, designed to identify strengths to be built upon and weaknesses to be addressed
- action plans arising from the reviews, containing strategies to tackle weaknesses and meet targets
- regular monitoring of retention and achievement in relation to action plans, and clear accountability and reporting on follow-up
- a feed-through from course review into teaching and tutorial practice, including associated programmes of staff development
- an expectation and encouragement of bottom-up, as well as top-down initiatives to improve the design and delivery of the curriculum
- securing parental involvement
- recognition that there is no one foolproof way to raise achievement, but that a range of strategies has to be followed, simultaneously and continually.

### **Recruitment, placement and induction**

- effective communication of the curriculum offer by a range of media, with an emphasis on clearly setting out course requirements and progression opportunities
- well-developed advice and guidance services for prospective students.
- clear entry criteria, applied systematically
- enrolment onto generic learning pathways, with final choice of course made later in the first term
- regular review of course placement in relation to the curriculum offer and pre-enrolment information, to ensure appropriate choice of clear learning pathways from foundation level upwards
- early diagnosis of 'at risk' students, to identify and alert the need for learning and other support
- the availability of 'taster' sessions and the ability of students to make early-stage course transfers
- well-planned induction programmes, with clearly set out and high expectations of what would be required of students in terms of their commitment
- careful selection of staff involved in the process, supported by tailored programmes of training.

### **Design and delivery of curriculum**

- continual adaptation of curriculum portfolio in light of changes in the profile of the student body, and movements in the labour market
- a willingness to withdraw from areas of provision with achievement rates persistently below target
- the availability of a full 'curriculum ladder' allowing progression right the way through from pre-entry to Level 4 and above
- a widespread practical awareness of the concept of *inclusive learning* manifested in differentiated approaches to the needs of individual learners
- a pro-active approach to ensuring the take-up of additional learning support by those who required it

- high expectations of students, based on teaching staff who provided good professional role models
- on vocational courses, the integration of related work experience and effective workplace simulation, or both
- coordinated scheduling of coursework to eliminate bottlenecks
- review and adjustment of the timetable in relation to students' other commitments.

***Tutorial and other support***

- regular review of students' academic progress and personal circumstances, individually as well as in groups
- the negotiation with individual students of targets and action plans to achieve them, making use of value added systems wherever possible
- close links between tutors and teaching staff
- pro-active referral to flexible systems of additional learner support, wherever necessary
- close liaison between tutors and Student Services, and other sources of support on non-academic matters
- rigorous systems for the selection, training and appraisal of staff with tutorial responsibilities.

***Teaching and pedagogy***

- active involvement of teaching staff in course review procedures
- teachers accept appropriate accountability for student achievement
- rigorous, regular and consistent system of lesson observation
- utilisation of observation reports within agreed systems of staff appraisal
- culture of ongoing improvement, supported by individually tailored programmes of continual professional development
- identification and dissemination of effective practice.

***Monitoring, evaluation and follow-up***

- MIS capable of providing accurate and up-to-date information on retention and achievement, down to course level and by individual student, and in a user-friendly format
- readily available online access to MIS on the part of managers and teaching staff
- all staff trained in accessing, interrogating and making use of MIS data.
- clearly stated policies on attendance and punctuality, with immediate follow-up of unexplained absence
- culture of student obligations as well as entitlements
- early identification of problems caused by outside pressures, and offer of support
- direction and programming of self-study time, especially in the case of younger students
- involvement of parents or other family members in sustaining student support.

## **The way forward**

- Some areas remain less developed than others:
  - MIS, where despite improvements there is still a wide gap between the best practice and the level of development that is typical
  - changes in course delivery in response to the more rigorous identification of retention and achievement problem areas; concepts of inclusive learning still have some way to go before they are likely to impact fully on the majority of students
  - sharing and learning from effective practice: colleges seem much better attuned to identifying weaknesses and acting upon them, than to building on their own strong points.

More work is required to understand fully the ways in which demographic factors act as barriers before we can be certain that their impact is not greater than we believe on the basis of the evidence currently available. At present it appears that the efforts at college level are already bringing about a noticeable narrowing in the inter-institutional achievement gap. Such efforts place considerable demands upon colleges. Ultimately, though, we believe that it ought to be possible to reduce the achievement gap to half its present size, or less.

## 1 BACKGROUND AND AIMS OF PROJECT

In the drive to raise standards and improve student achievement across the FE sector, it has been recognised for some time that there appeared to be wide differences in the retention and achievement rates of different colleges that were not obviously explicable by relative differences in student demography, or in other factors outside the direct influence of colleges (Audit Commission and Ofsted 1993). FEFC has undertaken analysis which indicates that retention and achievement rates for 41 general FE and tertiary colleges serving areas of deprivation (so-called 'high Widening Participation (WP) Factor' colleges) were found to be significantly below those of other colleges of the same type. No other group showed such significant differences as these. However, even within the high WP Factor group there is a considerable range of achievement rates (FEFC 1999).

In recent years the Agency has established robust evidence to demonstrate that student retention is influenced substantially by factors within the sphere of colleges' influence. A number of college-level intervention strategies have been shown to be capable of effecting significant improvements in retention rates (Martinez 1997; Martinez and Munday 1998). A body of case study evidence has been assembled which indicates that the same also applies to achievement rates (Martinez 2000). Investigations undertaken last year by the National Audit Office (NAO) broadly support these findings (Comptroller and Auditor General 2001).

Nonetheless, the impact of demography and of institutional performance on retention and achievement rates was not known with any precision. Without greater certainty on their relative influences, colleges remain concerned not to set benchmark targets that are unrealistically high. Nor do they wish to devote additional resources to tackling achievement rates that are below the average for apparently equivalent institutions if, in fact, they are really performing well, once proper allowance is made for comparative student profiles. Equally, some colleges with achievement rates that are above average for the sector may be lulled into complacency if they do not make proper allowance for the particular characteristics of their student profile.

In this context, therefore, the Agency established a research project *Differential achievement*, with the following aims:

- to investigate the reasons for the large variations in student retention and achievement, within and between institutions, and between different groups of students
- to assess the extent to which demographic factors are the main determinants of differences in rates of retention and achievement
- to identify institutional practices connected with higher and lower levels of retention and achievement so as to inform college-level improvement strategies.

Stage 1 of the project was primarily directed at the first two of the above aims, and involved analysis of ISR data. A summary of Stage 1 findings follows in section 2 of this report. The full report on the first stage of the project is now published as *Differential achievement: what does the ISR profile tell us?* (Davies and Rudden 2000).

In the second stage of the project, the Agency's consultants undertook a programme of visits to a sample of high WP Factor colleges to examine systems and practices

that might affect achievement. The visits were aimed at identifying the strategies that appear most effective in securing good achievement rates.

## 2 STAGE 1 FINDINGS

### Impact of ISR profile on achievement rates

Taken together, the relative differences in student profiles as recorded by the ISR are not capable of explaining the major part of inter-institutional variations in achievement. Colleges with the lowest rates of student achievement are below average primarily because their rates are lower for *all* categories of students, *not* because they have higher than average proportions of students in the ISR categories associated with below average achievement – even though the latter is usually also the case.

The analysis undertaken in Stage 1 was conducted on the basis of the data for the year 1997–98, the last fully audited set of figures available at the time the work commenced. In that year, the six high WP Factor colleges with the lowest long-course achievement rates averaged 44%, while the six with the highest rates averaged 78%. From our analysis of comparative ISR data we estimate that, at the absolute maximum, some 16 percentage points of the 34 percentage point gap between the colleges with the lowest and highest achievement rates could be attributed to relative differences in student profiles – that is, just under half. In the meantime, the 1998–99 data has been released by FEFC. This reveals that the achievement gap has closed to 29 percentage points (54–82%), the colleges with the lowest achievement rates having raised them at a faster than average rate compared with the previous year. Comparisons of the relative ISR profiles of the lowest and highest achieving of colleges, on the basis of this latest data, reveal notably fewer differences than for the previous year that could account for the gap between the two groups.

### Reliability of data

There are a number of potential explanations for inter-institutional variations in achievement in addition to those related to relative differences in ISR profiles. One possibility is that the data within the ISR is inaccurate to an extent that exaggerates those differences we have identified. So far as FEFC is concerned, in three of the 41 cases the 1997–98 long-course achievement rates for high WP colleges were flagged as being inaccurate, each of which was excluded from our analysis for this reason. There are some variations between the 1996–97, 1997–98 and 1998–99 long-course achievement rates for the same colleges that raise suspicions about the reliability of at least one of these year's figures. For example, one of the colleges that lay within the highest achieving group in 1996–97 only just escaped the lowest achieving group the following year. Two other colleges journeyed almost as far in the opposite direction. Three of the colleges in the highest achieving group in 1998–99 were well outside in the preceding two years. One of the colleges included in our sample for Stage 2 of this project lay within the highest achieving group in 1996–97 and 1998–99, but within the lowest achieving group in the intervening year!

Nonetheless, the general reliability of the ISR is acknowledged to have improved over time, and we can detect no evidence that the incidence of any inaccuracies was distributed in such a way as to have produced the achievement gap that we have noted.

### **Qualifications per student**

A further possibility is that the lowest achieving group of colleges tends to enter students for a greater than average number of qualifications, while the higher achieving group does the opposite. However, when the average numbers of qualifications per student are plotted against the achievement rates for all high WP Factor colleges, there is little or no correlation. This hypothesis can therefore be rejected.

### **Other demographic factors**

There are factors that might affect the relative profiles of colleges' student cohorts in addition to those we have used as a basis for our analysis. There are limits to the ability of the ISR to measure deprivation as it affects individual students. Other measures are available including postcodes, which are widely used as proxy indicators of relative deprivation. In as much as this method of measurement is successful, it may be said to capture a range of factors related to deprivation. If differences in the relative deprivation of their student bodies provided an explanation for inter-institutional differences in achievement rates across the high WP group of colleges, we should expect there to be a correlation. In fact, the relationship between achievement rates and the percentages of students from postcodes that trigger the WP uplift is weak. The line of best fit suggests that for every additional 10% of total student numbers that trigger the uplift, overall achievement rates fall by around 3% (1997–98 data) or less (1998–99). But the weakness of the correlation is revealed by the significant minority of high achieving colleges that have student profiles comprised overwhelmingly of students who trigger the uplift.

It is also possible that some of the fields within the ISR provide a level of discrimination between different types of students that is insufficient for the purposes of assessing the true impact on rates of achievement. For example, the ethnicity category Black–African encompasses individuals who are refugees in severely deprived circumstances, for whom English is not the first language, along with English speakers from largely middle-class backgrounds. In these circumstances, there is clearly the potential for the achievement rates of different colleges to be disproportionately affected.

### **Prior attainment**

This investigation has not examined in detail the relationship between achievement rates and prior attainment in nationally recognised qualifications. This is a complex field, which the Agency has investigated in another project concerning value added [(*insert reference*)]. It is now generally accepted that there are significant correlations

between GCSE scores and performance in A and AS levels. There also appear to be correlations between GCSE scores and GNVQ performance, albeit less strong. No reliable evidence yet exists as to the relationship between GCSE scores and other qualifications.

The relationship between the overall achievement rates of colleges and relative differences in the prior attainment profile is not entirely clear. There is obviously a negative correlation between overall achievement and the relative proportions of students at each qualification level. Colleges with lower achievement rates tend to have relatively higher proportions of students enrolled at Levels 1 and 2, though not to an extent that could account for the bulk of the achievement gap. Moreover, as the Agency has pointed out elsewhere, in theory the prior attainment profiles of students should not impinge further on FE, provided that students are enrolled at the level appropriate to their abilities (Martinez 1999). The fact that colleges with the lowest rates of student achievement have relatively higher proportions of students at Levels 1 and 2 does not suggest that they have a greater than average tendency to enter students for qualifications at levels beyond which they are able to cope.

### **Institutional performance**

Overall, therefore, the investigations undertaken as the first stage of the project concluded that the major part of institutional differences in achievement rates could not be explained by relative differences in student profiles as recorded in the ISR, or in other available measures. The main explanation, therefore, must lie in the influence of:

- geodemographic and other factors outside the direct influence of the college, which are not captured by the ISR, or by other measures that are utilised to profile student bodies
- differences in institutional ethos, systems, procedures and practices that affect student performance.

Evidence already assembled concerning influences on student retention, together with the reports from the FEFC Inspectorate, and from the National Audit Office, lead us to believe that, in general, the latter are likely to account for a substantial proportion of the inter-institutional differences in achievement rates, probably at least half.

## **3 STAGE 2 METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample of colleges**

Ten colleges cooperated in Stage 2 of the project, selected so as to include a range of long-course achievement rates. Five consultants undertook the fieldwork, each working with a pair of colleges with different long-course achievement rates, based on the 1997–98 data. Details of the colleges concerned are listed in Table 1, grouped in the pairs visited by the consultants. Each college was visited twice during the period July–November 2000. Members of the senior management teams, curriculum managers, teaching staff and students were interviewed. Interviews were semi-structured, using a standard pro-forma to ensure consistency.

**Table 1: Details of colleges participating in Stage 2 of Differential achievement**

College	FEFC region	Relative deprivation of students '98-'99	WP Factor	WP uplift %*	Penetration rate % (adj. %)**	Long-course achievement rate %
A: Sixth form	WM	Very high	1.059	63	0.25 (0.23)	'96-'97 '97-'98 '98-'99
B: Sixth form	EM	High	1.015	40	0.25 (0.09)	51 64 69
C: Gen FE/tert	GL	Very high	1.055	85	0.48 (1.11)	87 83 79
D: Gen FE/tert	WM	Very high	1.043	62	0.90 (0.77)	61a 62 71
E: Gen FE/tert	GL	Very high	1.041	69	0.44 (0.67)	87 49 83
F: Gen FE/tert	SW	High	1.018	30	3.51 (0.86)	49 46 43
G: Gen FE/tert	NW	High	1.035	39	2.18 (2.39)	77 77 76
H: Gen FE/tert	WM	High	1.030	31	0.61 (0.45)	66 84 83
I: Gen FE/tert	GL	Very high	1.037	64	0.35 (0.66)	62 35 50
J: Gen FE/tert	WM	Very high	1.048	59	1.83 (1.56)	62 62 67

Notes:

Colleges E, F and J were involved in mergers during the period concerned; some of the data for colleges F and J derives from the colleges that formed the merged institution.

FEFC regions: EM, East Midlands; GL, Greater London; NW, North West; SW, South West; WM, West Midlands.

\* WP uplift is the proportion of the college's students who qualify for additional Widening Participation funding.

\*\* The first figure is calculated on the basis of the total number of the college's students expressed as a percentage of the total 16+ population within a 15 kilometre radius of the main site of the college; the figure in brackets is an adjustment based on the number of other FE sector colleges within the 15k radius – the larger the variation from the average for this group of colleges, the greater the adjustment to the first figure – upwards in cases where the number of other colleges was above average, downwards where it was below average.

a This figure was flagged by FEFC as a significant underestimate.

Relevant documentation was also examined before and after each visit, including strategic plans, retention and achievement policies and Inspection reports. Detailed reports on each college, indicating practices and systems that appeared to influence student achievement, were discussed and synthesised.

### **Profile of colleges participating in Stage 2 of the project**

Eight general FE/tertiary colleges and two sixth form colleges participated in Stage 2 of the project.<sup>1</sup> In 1998–99, the long-course achievement rates for the 10 colleges concerned ranged from 43% to 83%. Over the period since 1996–97, improvements in achievement rates were generally most pronounced among the colleges whose achievement rates had been lowest at that time. In the case of four of the participating colleges, long-course achievement rates declined over the period in question, albeit marginally so and from a high baseline in three of these instances. The 1997–98 achievement rate for College D appears anomalously low compared with the rates for the years on either side, raising doubts about the accuracy of that figure. It should also be noted that there are considerable variations in the achievement rates of different courses within each individual college. There are therefore a number of courses with high rates of achievement at colleges with low overall achievement rates, and vice versa.

Within the sample, the colleges with the lower achievement rates are generally those with the higher Widening Participation factors, and the larger proportions of students who qualify for the WP funding uplift. However, in line with the findings arising from Stage 1 of the project, this link between measures of deprivation and rates of achievement is by no means uniform, and does not appear to explain the bulk of the 'achievement gap'.

In order to check if there was any indication that relative success in widening participation had a negative effect on rates of achievement, analysis was undertaken to examine relative catchment area penetration. Making like-with-like comparisons of this kind between different colleges presents considerable difficulties. There is no universally accepted definition of college catchment area, and the geographical spread of recruitment can differ markedly from one to another. Table 1 displays two measures of penetration for each of the 10 colleges. The first is calculated so as to avoid underestimation of the 'true' penetration rates of the colleges with the widest geographical spread of recruitment. The second makes a further adjustment to allow for different competitive circumstances, by weighting the first figure upwards or downwards according to the numbers of other FE-sector institutions located nearby. Nonetheless, even with these modifications, reservations remain about the validity of such measures as indicators of widening participation. Given these caveats, though, within the sample of Stage 2 colleges there is no obvious sign of any general negative correlation between catchment area penetration and achievement rates.

<sup>1</sup> Eight of the colleges have a high WP Factor. College F is categorised by FEFC as only 'average' in respect of the relative deprivation of its students. College B is categorised as 'high' for the relative deprivation of its students, but has a WP Factor below 1.025 (the boundary line used by the Council to benchmark for high WP Factor colleges).

The sections of the report that follow set out the findings arising from Stage 2 of the project under the same broad headings that were used to group the questions asked by the Agency's consultants during their visits to the 10 colleges concerned. These are:

- background, mission and ethos
- strategies for maintaining and raising achievement
- student recruitment, placement and induction
- curriculum development
- tutorial systems and other support systems
- teaching and pedagogy
- monitoring, evaluation and follow-up.

A summary of key characteristics of effective performance is provided at the end of each section.

## **4 BACKGROUND, MISSION AND ETHOS**

### **Catchment area and student profile**

All of the 10 colleges involved in Stage 2 of the project have WP Factors above the median for the sector. Though those with the lower rates of achievement tended to be associated with more pronounced indicators of deprivation, the large majority of interviewees were conscious of the challenges presented by the nature of the areas served by their colleges. Only in the case of College H did managers and staff consider that the population they served was not particularly poor.

There were a number of references to school-leaving attainment rates that were below the national average, and this is true of every LEA in which the sample colleges were situated. There is no sign of any general connection between LEA average GCSE points scores and the achievement rates of the colleges concerned. Colleges F and G, for example, are both located in cities with similar school attainment figures well below the national average, but differ markedly in their own achievement rates. There is some indication, though, that the colleges with the lower achievement rates tended to be associated with a more competitive educational environment, judged on the basis of the relative number of other FE-sector institutions with overlapping catchment areas. They may therefore have encountered greater difficulties in attracting the most able and best-motivated students.

As well as higher levels of deprivation, the other feature that most distinguishes the colleges in connection to their relative achievement rates is the ethnic profile of the student bodies. It is notable, for instance, that the two Stage 2 colleges with the lowest achievement rates (Colleges E and I) have high proportions of students drawn from minority ethnic groups. In the case of the College E, 65% of full-time students are drawn from non-white ethnic groups. Some 50 different mother tongues are spoken by the 15% of the college's students whose first language is not English. At College I, over 40% of FEFC-funded students are from Black and Asian minority groups. As we have noted in the findings from Stage 1 of the project, in general, differences in the ethnic mix of student bodies do not appear to be able to account for the bulk of the inter-institutional achievement gap. Within the Stage 2 sample of colleges, College C, for example, also has a high proportion of students drawn from

minority ethnic groups and yet in 1998–99 had an achievement rate above the average for the 10 colleges involved.

Some of the feedback received in response to the report on Stage 1 of the project hypothesised that the minority ethnic mix of the student body interacts with institutional factors in ways that have a negative effect on achievement over and above that relating to relative differences in ISR profiles. The impact of racism and negative stereotyping was claimed to add to the pressures associated with deprivation so as to place greater demands on the colleges most concerned, and reduce their achievement rates as a consequence. However, there is also a contrary argument that where the minority ethnic presence within student bodies is very small, their members may suffer from just as much racism and negative stereotyping, and have fewer peer group support mechanisms to help them cope. At present in the college sector, robust statistical evidence for or against these contrary positions is lacking.

### **Mission and ethos**

All of the Stage 2 colleges are committed to widening participation and enabling all students to realise their full potential. In some cases – Colleges B and D, for instance – widening participation had been an overtly high priority for some time; in others (Colleges E, F and J) there was a more recent increased emphasis on serving the wider community, connected in part to the mergers that had formed these institutions.

As we have noted, there was no obvious evidence that relative success in widening participation has impinged on the achievement rates of the colleges concerned in any consistent way. Nor did there appear to be any obvious correlation between their achievement rates and the relative priority accorded to widening participation.

Nonetheless, interviewees at College A felt that they had in the past enrolled students onto inappropriate courses in their 'enthusiasm to widen participation'. The principal of College H indicated that it was not the aim to cover every curriculum area or try to meet every need, and that students would be recommended to go elsewhere if it was more appropriate for them to do so. At this and other colleges there had been adjustments to the curriculum offer to match it more closely to the needs of actual and potential students (see also section 7 below).

In most of the colleges, a number of interviewees mentioned attitudes and values that helped to inhibit attempts to raise achievement. Below average attainment in local schools was carried forward in the form of low aspirations on the part of students, which in turn affected the expectations of staff (senior managers at Colleges C and G referred to 'collusion in under-achievement' on the part of some staff).

Among many of the managers, there was a raised consciousness that questioned 'soft' and unfocused student-centred approaches, and instead adopted 'tough love' policies targeted at individual circumstances. At College C, for instance, they were challenging a deep-seated attitude summed up as 'students matter; systems and data don't', which had inhibited a thorough examination of any problems relating to

raising student achievement. Interviewees there saw success in changing this attitude as a crucial factor in the improvements in achievement that had occurred in the last two years.

#### **Redefinition of mission after merger**

**College E** merged with another in 1998 and adopted a new 'community college' identity for the start of the 2000 academic year, with a public launch programme. The merger was aimed, among other things, at a more effective coordination of a wide range of disparate community-based provision. The college maintained strong links with the local authority and this had led to the establishment of a strategic partnership that sought to address the demand for 'high quality skills, training, qualifications and career development programmes in the sport and leisure business'.

**College F** was established in 1996 as a result of a merger between two well-established FE institutions. The college had subsequently merged with a third specialist FE institution. The college operated on five main sites, including a recently opened city-centre building. The college had developed a stronger community-orientated focus drawing on the strengths of the former individual institutions in order to address low participation in FE across the city. As a result, there had been growth in provision, particularly at Levels 1, 2 and Entry. Partly as a consequence of this growth and a perception that many students were coming from schools without basic literacy and numeracy skills, there had been a substantial growth in the number of additional support units claimed.

#### **Centrality of retention and achievement**

In the majority of the colleges, securing high levels of student retention and achievement had high priority within the current strategic plan. College A also gave prominence to widening participation, while the strategic plan of College D stressed growth, diversification and access. At College B there was no overt reference to the maintenance and improvement of retention and achievement rates within the strategic plan, but these issues were emphasised within the annual course review process.

In many cases, the strategic importance accorded to improving student achievement had been stimulated by FEFC Inspection reports. Generally speaking, the second round of Inspections was much more explicit than the first about the need to improve student achievements, in some programme areas and courses, if not generally. Colleges with some of the higher achievement rates within the sample did not escape these strictures. Thus, at its last Inspection in February 1999, College B was directed to 'address the declining retention and pass rates on some courses'. The major drive to raise achievement at College C was stimulated by a 1997 Inspection report that led subsequently to the acquisition of significant financial support from the Standards Fund. Ironically if unsurprisingly, though, the colleges with the lower achievement rates were among those now according the highest priority to the issue. At College E, for instance, poor retention and achievement was highlighted in the reports of Inspections taking place in 1994 and 1998, and was addressed further in the re-inspections of the IT programme area in March and November 2000.

A combination of factors seemed to characterise the colleges with the higher levels of achievement, or the most notable sustained improvements:

- the centrality of student achievement within the mission of the college, coupled with a widespread awareness of this across the staff
- a belief among the majority of staff that interventions at college-level could make a difference, and that students were not predestined for low achievement because of their backgrounds
- a general commitment to quality assurance and improvement across course teams and individual teaching staff, as well as at managerial level.

Similar attributes have already been noted in studies of effective college self-assessment (Dixon and Walker 2000). The ability of college MIS systems to produce meaningful and timely data was likewise an important contributory factor. Notable improvements in this area at College C, for instance, were seen by interviewees there as having been central to improved achievements in recent years. Regular, good quality data also helped governing bodies to monitor the academic performance of the college effectively, an area that until recently came in for regular criticism from the Inspectorate (FEFC 1998, 1999).

Some colleges appeared to have tackled the issue thoroughly, over a longer period, and to have been more successful in embedding a culture of continual improvement at course team level. Having said this, colleges where achievement rates remained well below the national average in 1998–99 – Colleges E and I, for instance – were now making major sustained efforts to address the situation. As we have noted, trends nationally, as well as within the sample of colleges, indicate a steady closing of the ‘achievement gap’, which suggests that these initiatives are having the desired impact.

## **Strategic initiatives to raise student achievement**

**At College I**, the draft strategic plan for 2000/03 made a number of references to raising achievement. Its first priority objective was 'further substantial improvements in student retention and achievement'. Associated tasks included the identification of courses for withdrawal, modification or replacement in the following year. The second priority was 'improving the processes of teaching and learning'. Supporting initiatives included a revised staff development programme for all teachers, focusing on how students learn. Raising achievement rates was a major focus in 1999–2000, the college having failed to meet or exceed national benchmark figures for all except level H (4 and above) long qualifications for the 19+ age group. Provisional statistics for 1999–2000 showed significant progress. The deputy principal was developing a 'raising retention and achievement project', which will set out in detail the processes being developed by the college, with dates for implementation and identification of those responsible. The self-assessment report aimed to 'promote and celebrate students success' and referred to the initiation of a 'culture of performance review and monitoring' with explicit lines of accountability and increased ownership of targets. One of the responsibilities of the deputy principal was raising quality and achievement. She had been in post for a year. A clear cross-college vision had been developed with the involvement of governors. The aim was for an overall improvement in achievement figures of 17%, a deliberately ambitious target to 'kick start' the process. Key features of the approach were:

- to raise awareness of the importance of student success
- to identify problems in order to find solutions
- the avoidance of a blame culture
- a quality improvement strategy in the strategic plan, with governor involvement
- the development of consistency across the college.

National standards were taken seriously. Working to achieve Investors in People was seen as a positive process. The college will be working towards the European Quality Standard. There was a perception among middle managers that the emphasis was shifting from student numbers and funding units to a focus on the quality of provision and student achievement. There was a college-wide Inclusive Learning Action Plan, which was cross-referenced with the College Strategic Plan, the College Staff Development Plan and a range of initiatives relating to widening participation.

**At College J**, strategic emphasis was placed on a culture of continuing improvement. The first strategic priority in the 1999–2000 Strategic Plan was for the college 'to continuously improve its service, particularly in its core business of teaching and learning and to raise the level of student achievement'. This would remain a priority in coming years. In a section on 'Consultation with TECs and Lifelong Learning Partnership', under Retention and Achievement the Plan stressed:

- 'the quality and appropriateness of provision and the importance of participation being part of a lifelong learning programme, not just short-term recruitment'
- 'balancing the widening participation agenda with genuine improvements in the quality of student experience, so we can continue to raise achievement levels'.

All of these intentions were linked to objectives in the strategic plan and targets in operational plans. They were also reflected in the development of a range of policies and the formation of a number of groups designed to improve quality assurance.

### **Key characteristics – *strategic commitment***

- a clear commitment at SMT and governing body level to the importance of delivering and sustaining high levels of student achievement
- the establishment of clear, challenging but realistic achievement targets, against which progress can be monitored
- effective communication to college staff of the importance accorded to student achievement, and to the associated targets
- a culture of continual improvement, underpinned by clear accountabilities.
- an embedded belief that the college could make a significant difference to student achievement, even allowing for the influences of demographic factors outside its direct control.

## **5 STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING AND RAISING ACHIEVEMENT**

### **College-wide strategies**

Though all colleges had in place systems for the review of and accountability for student achievement, in Colleges B, D and F there was far more autonomy at departmental level in the improvement strategies that were adopted and implemented. In the latter two cases, in particular, this reflected the natures of their organisational structures. Though there were some benefits in devolved structures in encouraging ownership of issues, there were also inevitable inconsistencies in the extent to which college-wide strategies were evolved and implemented. At College F, for example, there were some notable faculty-wide retention and achievement strategies, but senior managers acknowledged the need to develop a more coherent planning cycle, to increase the effective monitoring of college-wide strategies.

In recent years, major college-wide initiatives to improve student retention and achievement had been put in place, or reformed and augmented, at most of the colleges. In some cases, as at Colleges E and F, SMTs recognised that in the past cross-college planning had been fragmented and that 'too many loops were left open'. There was a need to focus on systems to ensure greater consistency and to align the various planning and review cycles.

There was a range of distinctive features about each college's approaches. Nevertheless, a number of common aspects emerged:

- regular review in conjunction with curriculum leaders and course teams
- action planning, targeted at courses or programme areas giving cause for concern
- clear accountability and reporting in the way in which action points had been fulfilled, involving regular face-to-face meetings between managers and individual staff with a major focus on retention and achievement
- related activities to review the quality of teaching and tutoring, and to provide associated staff development.

Once again, though, it should be emphasised that, in isolation and imposed top-down, such initiatives by no means guaranteed success, however well designed the

structures and systems. Culture shifts also needed to occur, so that a critical mass of staff accepted that improvements in student achievement were by no means beyond their influence, and that things would not change without their commitment to raising achievement. Such changes took time to embed. Generally speaking, and making due allowance for differences in their ISR profiles, the higher-achieving colleges had been relatively more successful in making this transition.

### **Recruitment, diagnosis and support**

**College A** was carrying out a range of strategies to improve its achievement. These included:

- improving initial assessment and recruitment procedures
- providing appropriate support for the significant number of students with poor levels of basic skills
- focusing on evidence of students' attitude and motivation towards achieving prior to enrolling on college courses.

### **Standards Fund and other initiatives**

**At College C** achievement rates were now a major concern for everyone. This was not always the case. The FEFC Inspection report in 1997 indicated that achievement rates did not figure in the self-assessment reports. The college was identified as 'a college causing concern' by the FEFC and so got considerable Standards Fund help:

- £64K for improving part-time achievements and to review management and quality systems for hourly paid staff in particular
- a new appointment oversaw data capture and reporting for ESOL; new ESOL qualification aims were developed
- £61K for improving tutorials; the 1997 Inspection report had found these to be inconsistent; there was now a new tutorial policy and tutorial handbook and there were now seven lead tutors answerable to the quality manager
- £118K to improve data capture and reporting; MIS data was put on the intranet in a very comprehensive and user-friendly format, which allowed staff to update records.

These Standards Fund initiatives were being continued this year, with the staff appointed being kept on. There is a general feeling that all the Standards Fund initiatives were very productive and useful.

Non-Standards Fund college-wide initiatives included:

- Achievement reviews: continual monitoring of retention and achievement up to Executive level. There were achievement reviews for heads of schools and for course managers. These had three-year trends and compare performance to national benchmarks. Achievement reviews occurred every term, thus monitoring ongoing student attendance and progress. Areas for action were identified and followed up. The quality manager reported back to the Executive on whether these action points had been achieved.
- Business Review Meetings: held about 1–2 times a term, these looked at recruitment, budget, and so on.
- Quality panels for each school in the college: each one included a lead tutor, an additional learning support person, a key skills person and a practitioner. Remission was allowed for this role, which was central.
- Lead tutors: they were responsible for the quality of tutorials – a substantial role including training staff and observing whole class and individual tutorials.
- Achievement action plans: these were required for at-risk courses.
- Level 2 emphasis: prestige centres had been created with an excellent environment specifically for Level 2 courses. The hope was that this would raise the morale of both students and staff at Level 2.

### **Course-level initiatives focusing on the student**

**At College D**, bottom-up and top-down approaches were used for the development of strategies. Each school or department was fairly autonomous, though accountable to the SMT. More local strategies of interest included:

- Breaking assignments down into tasks: one course team was setting one task per week rather than whole assignments. This evened out student workload.
- Regular testing: the section leader for Maths and IT in the college's sixth form centre had attention and achievement figures well above national benchmarks. Every six weeks there was a timed assessment or tests written by the class teacher. The bottom 5% to 10% of students was required to do extra work and/or come for extra help. Attendance for tests was good.
- Parental involvement: if a student was not present to collect work it was posted back without using the college franking machine, so that students could not easily identify it and conceal it from parents. The college had also tried marking the envelope 'attendance alert' so parents were aware there was a difficulty. Parents were written to if there was an attendance problem.
- Spot checks: attendance was checked by the heads of departments from time to time without warning, and letters sent out to parents (without the college frank on it) if a student was absent. This worked well as students never knew when the check would be and they could not intercept the letter on the doormat. As a consequence of these measures a culture of attendance had been created.
- Tough but supportive ethos: there was confidence building 'pep talking' and motivational input from the head of department, to encourage student self-help.

### **Prioritisation of specific strategies**

**At College G**, the principal, assistant principal and heads of curriculum were focusing on the following specific strategies:

- introductory courses for young people and adults
- a learning policy for 16–18 year olds
- a coherent curriculum offer
- issues of disaffection and their remedies; white male exclusion was a particular problem in one area of the city
- basic skills and key skills initial assessment and support
- integrated student support and standards for non-attendance
- retention and achievement based on neighbourhoods and not on global figures; retention and achievement was seen as needing to relate to student background.

Two issues still caused problems, and had not been fully resolved:

- tension between the need to recruit for funding units and the need to improve retention and achievement
- the absence of value-added measures that could be applied across the whole curriculum.

### **Focus on point of delivery**

On formation as a result of merger, **College J** was restructured into programme-based teams, with the intention to 'put resources and responsibility as close to the point of delivery, and therefore as close to the students, as possible'. An Achievement Team of staff with key management responsibilities was set up to implement the strategy. The MOT ('Meeting Our Targets') group was established. Senior staff scrutinised targets and achievements at course level with course leaders, who had to design and implement a recovery strategy for failing or unviable small courses. If unsuccessful, courses were withdrawn. This process was viewed positively by most teaching staff. A number of significant changes to the curriculum and improved success rates had resulted. The process was continual. The MOT was backed up by service level agreements that defined agreed actions and specified completion times. Staff development in target setting had also been provided. National quality standards were taken seriously. IIP, The Charter Mark and ISO 9000 had been achieved through building them round the course team profile. The college had used the Standards Fund to invest in training and support for part-time staff.

## **Communication of strategies**

Teaching staff at all the colleges, as well as their managers, were in no doubt about the importance of student retention and achievement. There were some differences, though, in attitudes to the way in which these issues were communicated.

Curriculum managers at College H, for example, felt that the college's mission and ethos was communicated effectively, but that not all staff took on the necessary individual responsibility for tackling student achievement. Some of the teaching staff there, however, indicated that though they were kept informed about retention and achievement the 'message' often appeared negative and not encouraging to staff involvement.

Generally speaking, colleges dealt regularly with retention and achievement at staff meetings, in newsletters and via staff development activities. There was a wide range of examples to raise staff awareness of the issues, to disseminate evidence from national research in the field, to encourage effective practice and to improve teaching quality.

Improvements in the timeliness and quality of MIS data had clearly made a major impact in raising awareness of the issues, and in convincing at least some staff of the need to address them. There were a number of instances where hitherto staff had not realised how their own programme areas and courses lined up against the national average, and with comparable provision in their own institutions. Good quality data, communicated effectively within a culture of continual improvement rather than apportionment of blame, made a key difference in ensuring that staff confronted achievement-related problems, rather than concealed or denied them.

### **Learning development**

**College F** had recently devoted a one-day staff conference to retention and achievement issues. The extensive development and provision of learning support (termed 'learning development') was a major strategic response to improving retention and achievement and is perceived as a significant strength. Senior staff pointed to the use of the learning support strategy as a springboard for the development and implementation of other teaching and learning strategies, for example analysis and use of preferred learning styles information.

### **Staff meetings and learning advisers**

At **College I**, centre-based meetings and termly full staff meetings with the principal or deputy principal had been established, with a view to raising awareness among staff. The importance of retention and achievement was stressed and attendant issues explored. A team of 'lead learning advisers' was established from Spring 2000. The aim was for the advisers to support the tutorial process, with a particular focus on appropriate course placement and transfer. Advisers would also have a role in monitoring tutorial provision and the learning review process.

### **Celebrating successes**

**College J** had developed a Student Retention and Achievement Strategy, drawing on published research. This committed the college to the development of learner autonomy, the publication and analysis of achievement data, the refinement of Student Services and the development of appropriate curricula. 'Success centres' were established, publicising results and individual student achievements, at various levels. These might include finding work, getting into university or completing successful projects. The college held an annual prizegiving ceremony.

## Benchmarks and targets

All colleges are required by FEFC to set targets for student retention and achievement making use of nationally published benchmarking data. The colleges involved in this project mostly used the figures for the high WP Factor colleges as comparators. There were relatively few examples of attempts to define more precise benchmarks, though a number of interviewees were conscious that the national medians were not necessarily appropriate to their own circumstances. At College A, the SMT rightly noted that their student profile was atypical of that of the majority of sixth form colleges. High WP Factor FE/tertiary college data was therefore also taken into account. At College H, the adult Basic Education area benchmarked itself against equivalent provision in a neighbouring college.

The benchmarking process inevitably meant that colleges with a trend of achievement well below the published medians had the most demanding targets. At College I, therefore, a 17 percentage point uplift was aimed for by the end of the current academic year.

Quite commonly, internal benchmarks were also set that triggered remedial attention. At College H an action plan was required for any course with an achievement rate that fell below 50%. Persistently low achieving courses had been withdrawn from the curriculum offer altogether at Colleges C, D, G and J.

Here again, relevant data was seen as having a crucial part to play. At College E improvements in the timeliness and accuracy of MIS data were seen as a matter of urgency. Systems to speed up the collection, input and analysis of data were under development. Linked to these were new arrangements for planning, review and target setting that were expected to improve the college's ability to tackle retention and achievement as they came on-stream.

Ideally the benchmarking process should result in the setting of challenging but realistic targets. Differences in the student profiles of colleges clearly influence the achievement rates that they can reasonably be expected to record. Nonetheless, the findings arising from Stage 1 of this project suggest that all High WP Factor colleges should be capable of delivering rates of student achievement that are above the current median level for this group. In that sense, therefore, the national medians are not 'unfair' as target indicators for those institutions with achievement rates that fall well below the current median level for their group.

### Online information

At College C, a bar graph comparison of results was made available via the college's intranet, incorporating benchmarks for retention and achievement and showing the three-year trend. These had to be used for reviews and course team reports. They were available online to every member of staff for every course in a user-friendly format. The senior curriculum manager stressed the need for every target to have an accompanying strategy for its achievement.

#### Achievement benchmarking and action planning

At College H, internal benchmarks were based on national benchmarks (where available) and what the college considered 'reasonable achievement'. Targets for retention and achievement were now set through 'achievement benchmarking'. MIS supplied achievement data to curriculum managers. All courses with less than 50% achievement had to draw up an action plan, which was now monitored by the curriculum standards manager.

#### Key characteristics – *college-wide approaches*

- annual course review and self-assessment procedures, with the active involvement of curriculum leaders and course teams, designed to identify strengths to be built upon and weaknesses to be addressed
- action plans arising from the reviews, containing strategies to tackle weaknesses and meet targets
- regular monitoring of retention and achievement in relation to action plans, and clear accountability and reporting on follow-up
- a feed-through from course review into teaching and tutorial practice, including associated programmes of staff development
- an expectation and encouragement of bottom-up as well as top-down initiatives to improve the design and delivery of the curriculum
- securing parental involvement
- recognition that there is no one foolproof way to raise achievement, but that a range of strategies has to be followed, simultaneously and continually.

## 6 STUDENT RECRUITMENT, PLACEMENT AND INDUCTION

### Pre-enrolment information

There is now a considerable body of evidence that if students are supported effectively to select courses that are appropriate to their needs, if they understand fully what the courses will entail, and if they are otherwise assisted in 'settling-in', then their chances of eventual successful completion are notably increased (Martinez 1997; Martinez and Munday 1998; Martinez 2000; Comptroller and Auditor General 2001). The college management teams were certainly well aware of the importance of enrolment and induction programmes in reaching retention and achievement targets.

The first stage in this process – the communication of pre-enrolment information – was being strengthened at a number of the colleges concerned. At Colleges F and I, the introduction of a centralised admissions system had improved the quality of the way pre entry enquiries were handled. In addition to the standard prospectuses and course leaflets, details of all courses had been placed on the website at College C, and on a widely available CD-ROM at College D.

There were a number of staff and student interviewees, however, who felt that pre-course information still varied considerably in quality. Ironically, information was far more successful for prospective students who already had a reasonably clear idea of the course and qualification on which they wanted to enrol. Those who were least sure of what they wanted were the most likely subsequently to feel that they had not realised what would be involved and that they had made the wrong choice. Students at College G were also critical of the national call-line learndirect, which was viewed as being run by non-professionals unable to provide specialist advice in the level of detail that was needed. The problem of combining a readily available enquiry service with the capability of providing detailed and specific information was one that exercised staff at most of the colleges that were visited. College F's Student Services section had attempted one solution in the form of a Frequently Asked Questions guide to studying at college aimed at 16–19 year olds. At College E, programme-specific brochures supplemented the main prospectus – for example, the Leisure College prospectus, which featured details of the college's sport, recreation and leisure provision.

It would appear, though, that initial information and guidance is an area that colleges must work on if they are to maintain their position. In general, success in widening participation increases the proportion of entrants who are uncertain of the direction that would be best for them to take. Such new entrants are also among the least likely to access information via electronic media. Getting the right quantity and quality of information across to individuals who may well not know the questions that they should ask remains a key challenge for colleges – and one that is unlikely to be met without a significant amount of face-to-face mediation.

### **Placing students on the right course**

Management teams at a number of the colleges regarded more effective placement onto courses as a key issue in maintaining and improving achievement. Processes of enrolment interviewing, diagnostic assessment and course placement had been strengthened in several cases, underpinned by staff development for those involved.

There were a number of problems in this area that were difficult to overcome. Effective guidance interviews are time-consuming, and require staff skills that are by no means universal. A feature of a number of the systems that were observed was the attempt to identify 'at risk' students so that learning and other support services could be alerted. Several teaching staff who were interviewed, however, identified student motivation as being a more important factor than personal circumstances. Examples were quoted of students from the most deprived backgrounds who succeeded against the odds because they were strongly focused on an ultimate goal that required their successful completion of the course in question. Opinions differed as to the extent such motivation could be fostered by the college. At College E, some teaching staff noted that information about students gathered by admissions staff was not always passed on to tutors, with a consequence that learning support needs were not always diagnosed early enough, if at all. College B contrasted with College A in having a more developed college-wide system of course placement. Though recruitment procedures at the latter had been tightened, the ethos was noticeably

more inclined towards 'open access' in line with the high priority accorded to widening participation.

Characteristics of the most effective systems of course placement appeared to be:

- well-developed advice and guidance services to prospective students
- rigorous enrolment interviews, supported by clear college-wide procedures
- regular review of course placement in relation to the curriculum offer and pre-enrolment information, to ensure an appropriate choice of clear 'learning pathways' from foundation level onwards
- diagnosis of 'at risk' students, to identify and alert the need for subsequent learning and other support
- the availability of 'taster' sessions and the ability, in the event of dissatisfaction with the course chosen initially, to make course transfers at an early stage
- careful selection of staff involved in process, supported by tailored staff-development programmes in associated skills.

#### **'Joined-up' recruitment and placement procedures**

**At College B**, there was a well-developed process to ensure that students were placed on the most appropriate courses, achieved by use of common interview forms and identified staff who carried out interviews following a training session from the Student Services officer. Course entry guidelines were provided for each interviewer and trained college careers guidance personnel were available to support the initial guidance interview. If a student reference identified 'at risk' criteria – for example, poor time management or attendance at school – then use of a faculty contract was suggested. Each student interviewed had to apply for the course (even though they might already have followed a course at the college) and common documentation was used. The college had a team of trained staff (ESOL, basic skills, dyslexia, and so on) who provided the 'Skills Development Service'. It was recognised that students following courses at all levels might have learning support needs, either at induction or during the course.

#### **Centralising admissions**

**College F** had recently implemented a centralised admissions system as a direct response to problems of drop-out resulting from mismatches between student expectations and the requirements of their intended programme. The admissions process delivered a broader entitlement to advice and guidance enabling students to gather the maximum information about their intended programme and the college. The admissions system used interviewing tutors and there were plans to accredit or 'badge' them in the future as part of the quality assurance process. Programme areas conducted more detailed subject specific interviews. Some faculties – for example Hair and Beauty – strongly encouraged the involvement of parents or other significant adults in the interview process.

#### **Induction**

Students at all of the colleges were provided with some kind of induction programme aimed at helping them orientate themselves with college and course. At College B there was a 'whole-college' approach to induction, which took place during the first three weeks. All staff there went through a training day to ensure a consistent approach and receive up-to-date information. At College C 'induction checklists' were provided in a handbook for tutors. Student evaluations of the induction

programme were built into the course review process. At College F, students were increasingly enrolled onto generic 'pathways' programmes with final choice of course made after a follow-up advice session approximately six weeks into the programme. College C had successfully introduced a mentoring system for black students, involving effective role models from the community who volunteered for the post.

Most staff interviewees felt that the right balance had now been arrived at between general induction to the college, and the specific requirements of a particular course. Most colleges also used induction as an opportunity for a more thorough diagnostic assessment of learning support needs. Several interviewees remarked that despite the attention to pre-course information it was only at this stage that many students began to realise the commitments that would be involved in order to complete their chosen programmes successfully. There were a number of references to an increasing emphasis on student obligations as well as upon their entitlements.

Students interviewed generally found formal induction programmes useful. Younger students found that there were differences in teaching and learning styles to those with which they had been familiar at school. For many adults, college represented a return to learning after a long break, and they therefore welcomed help in familiarising themselves with what would be required. A number of student interviewees regarded early-stage course transfers as being rather more difficult to arrange than was (in theory) the case.

Despite a generally positive reaction to the induction process, it was striking how much students' early experiences of the course proper coloured their attitudes towards it. Only two months after initial enrolment, many student interviewees had developed very firm views on the kinds of demotivating factors that made them contemplate changing course or leaving college. A number of these resulted from external pressures, including:

- peer pressure – sexism, bullying, social distractions
- financial pressures – some students in part-time employment were tempted to extend their hours of work
- health problems
- family commitments
- travel-to-college time.

Other demotivating factors were more directly within the influence of the college:

- concentration by teaching staff on 'bright' students at expense of others
- quality of some teaching – unprepared lessons, weak voice, apparent lack of enthusiasm for subject, dull lessons, unexplained jargon, negative comments about students' abilities or where they might end up in life
- perceived lack of relevance of key skills
- negative learning – inability to complete a task or understand a concept, a sense of having failed the same subject already, falling behind with work
- promises unfulfilled –course content not what was expected, unsatisfactory equipment or facilities, lack of work-experience, perceived threats to prospects of progression
- long college day or timing of sessions.

### **Induction procedures and 'taster' sessions**

**At College B**, students unsure about which course to choose were enabled to access 'taster' sessions over 2–3 weeks and could also arrange one-to-one or small group discussions, or information and support sessions with subject teachers to ensure they understood what different courses would entail. All students undertook a range of initial assessment activities during induction. Information from initial assessments was given to the student and to heads of department for tutors and teachers, as well as being used to identify students requiring individual learning support. This was discussed with the student and a joint agreement was signed. The Skills Development Service also responded to referrals by tutors or students, and agreed individual education plans with students – a commitment of 3.5 FTE staff, with the college seeking to recruit more staff to this section, which was seen as having a key role to play in improving achievement and retention through the provision of ESOL and communication skills support to a large number of students from minority ethnic groups.

### **Generic pathways programmes**

**At College F**, students were increasingly enrolled onto generic 'pathways' programmes with final choice of course made after a follow-up advice session approximately six weeks into the programme. The pathways programme covered a broad range of induction activities and allowed for diagnostic assessment of basic skills and the identification of possible risk factors including behavioural problems, punctuality and attendance.

### **Readiness to learn**

**At College J**, initial assessment included a focus on students' 'readiness to learn' – the extent to which they had realistic goals and the confidence and skills to work at their chosen level. There was an attempt to replace the stigma associated with learner support with a culture of entitlement. The aim was the early recognition, availability and provision of additional support. The tutorial system made a key contribution here. Learning support was well resourced and well integrated. A team of staff was established with a 0.5 FTE member in each vocational area. Staff had gained qualifications through professional development arrangements. Staff testified to the positive impact of increased resources, particularly for childcare.

### **Key characteristics – recruitment, placement and induction**

- effective communication of the curriculum offer by a range of media, with an emphasis on clearly setting out course requirements and progression opportunities
- well-developed advice and guidance services for prospective students
- clear entry criteria, applied systematically
- enrolment onto generic learning pathways, with final choice of course made later in the first term
- regular review of course placement in relation to the curriculum offer and pre-enrolment information, to ensure appropriate choice of clear learning pathways from foundation level upwards
- early diagnosis of 'at risk' students, to identify and alert the need for learning and other support
- the availability of 'taster' sessions and the ability of students to make early-stage course transfers
- well-planned induction programmes, with clearly set out and high expectations of what would be required of students in terms of their commitment
- careful selection of staff involved in the process, supported by tailored programmes of training.

## **7 CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT**

### **Design of curriculum**

Across the colleges there was widespread evidence of increased attention to reviewing and adjusting the curriculum offer to match the needs of prospective students, and to help sustain their retention and achievement once enrolled. Sometimes, as at College E, there was a realisation that not all students had been able to access the curriculum at an appropriate level. As a consequence students had been enrolled onto GNVQ advanced courses, who were then unable to cope. This situation was now being rectified. In other instances, further progress had been made. At College B 'traditional' A-level staff were said to be increasingly accepting the need to diversify and to provide more lower level courses and more vocational alternatives. This change of attitude had been helped by the growing numbers of students who had progressed upwards through the levels during their time at college. Colleges C and D both now had wide offers covering all levels from pre-entry to Level 4 and above, so that true 'curriculum ladders' were in place.

### **Curriculum innovation and withdrawal**

There was a noticeable trend among the general FE/tertiary colleges to strengthen vocational provision and to reduce the number of courses leading to academic qualifications. The aim was to adapt the curriculum to the needs of learners and improve their achievement. GCSEs were being phased out at Colleges I and J, and A-level provision rationalised at College G.

In other cases (such as Colleges C and D) awarding bodies had been changed with a positive impact on achievement. At College J, modular and short courses were being developed to give students an early experience of success and incremental achievement. All full-time courses now led to more than one qualification. Moves were also underway towards the development of a unitised curriculum, which could offer credit accumulation. Basic skills provision had been integrated in mainstream courses, though discrete basic skills courses with vocational links were also available.

At College F, the development and provision of learning support (known there as 'learning development') was a major strategic response to raising retention, and thereby achievement. Learning support was viewed at the college as a developmental process delivered within a vocational context. The link to the programmes of the individual students concerned was seen as essential, and as accounting for the good level of uptake of learning support in some faculties. Generally noticeable also was a willingness on the part of management teams to close courses that had a history of persistently poor retention and achievement, in spite of attempts to improve their position. This happened even where the level of demand was in theory sufficient for them to be maintained within the curriculum.

#### **Curriculum change to support student achievement**

##### **College G:**

- development of a more vocational curriculum
- development of courses to ensure progression opportunities between levels
- introduction of additional GNVQ courses at intermediate level
- segmentation into client groups
- introduction of summer schools, 'taster's and induction days
- ethos of the 'creative curriculum', which utilises real experience and better subject coordination across college
- concentration on basic skills and key skills support
- rigorous tutorial system and individual action planning.

##### **College H:**

- move away from academic to vocational curriculum
- development of sporting academy
- cross-college key skills
- strengthening college tutorial system and adoption of Greenhead value-added model where appropriate
- childcare courses run as one group for six weeks and then split into NNEB or BTEC
- Basic Education students enrol on a generic course and then decide on achievement qualification at a later date
- construction students are screened into levels
- areas set targets to improve vertical progression
- implementation of Curriculum 2000 and enrichment programme.

## **Curriculum structures, organisation and delivery**

A number of more flexible approaches to timetabling were observed, to allow students to tailor their studies more easily to their other commitments. For example, in College F the Faculty of Administration and Business Technology operated on a 48 week year in order to allow scope for varied attendance patterns and rolling starting dates. Rolling starting dates were also a feature of some provision within the Faculty of Hair and Beauty Therapy. Timetabling there had also eliminated 'slack time' and start times had been moved to 09.30 to accommodate childcare commitments.

Management staff were generally more conscious than teachers of the concept of inclusive learning, differentiating the needs of individual students and adapting to them appropriately. Here, the role of FEFC's Inclusive Learning Quality initiative was acknowledged. However, it was also widely recognised that there was still considerable potential for progress, and inclusive learning was featuring increasingly within programmes of staff development.

## **Expectations of students and staff**

A general feature of the courses and programme areas which enjoyed the greatest success in improving or maintaining achievement was the high level of expectations of both students and staff. In these cases, a culture was apparent that combined high degrees of accountability and ownership. Staff who had high aspirations for themselves were frequently seen to lead by example with their own students. Within a college-wide framework of policy and support, staff who felt encouraged to do so could be highly innovative in improving the curriculum. Some of the most striking examples of improvements in curriculum delivery, which had been seen to have dramatic positive impact on retention and achievement, had been undertaken on the initiative of main grade lecturing staff. Because such individuals had aspirations to improve a problematical situation, and because they did not feel powerless to act, or that remedial action was someone else's responsibility, they were able to bring to bear their specialist knowledge of both subject area and students to great effect. In the absence of such a culture, 'top-down' initiatives were unlikely to succeed to anything like the same extent, however laudable their intent.

## Innovations in Motor Vehicle Engineering and Sport, Leisure and Tourism

At College E, Motor Vehicle Engineering provided a good example of how staff had worked hard to develop the curriculum to make it more responsive to student needs. There was an even split in time spent in workshops and classrooms with a good mix of activity in each. The curriculum had been modularised to enable students to work more effectively at their own pace, and portfolio development had been 'demystified' for students. Workshops had been redesigned and rebuilt to make them more reflective of garage practice. Motor Vehicle students spoke enthusiastically about the course. They felt that the mix of workshop to classroom delivery was about right even given the fact that some students could gain further workshop experience through their jobs while for others college provided the only workshop experience they could gain. The use of the final hour of the day for portfolio building and review was welcomed. Students also noted that tutors had high expectations of them as students and that there was a distinctly work-like ethos within the area. They valued the practical work experience that tutors possessed.

The Sport, Leisure and Tourism area provided another example of the development of high quality curriculum provision. The leadership and motivational skills of the curriculum area coordinator appeared to be a significant factor. Provision had recently relocated to a suite of rooms at the stadium of a nearby Premier League football club. This was as a result of a number of strategic partnerships that the college had developed, notably with the club itself and with the commercial arm of the local authority's Leisure Service Department. Students referred to the close fit this gave between their learning environment, the content of their programmes and their career aspirations. There had been a number of early problems in accessing resources, some still to be resolved. Parts of some programmes were still delivered at the main site. Given such a high profile location, the tendency for students to be attracted by the facility itself was a distinct possibility. However, the students themselves specifically discounted this. Effective recruitment advice and guidance had helped to ensure that students were on courses because they matched their longer-term aims. Only one student was known to have left the course because of a misapprehension about its content. Students referred to the distinctive atmosphere and culture at the stadium site. Staff had high expectations of students and knew the students very well as individuals. Students felt that there was a greater focus on work and study – one student contrasted the ethos with the 'laid-back' approach that characterised her previous experience on a business studies course. Staff were seen as wanting students to do well and succeed – 'they want you to be there' and 'teachers want to do their best for you' were two comments made by students. Students felt that staff were 'great communicators and motivators'. They noted the impact that the curriculum coordinator had on their experience and how his enthusiasm was transmitted to other staff working within the area.

### High expectations

At College F, curriculum delivery in a number of faculties was characterised by markedly high expectations of students (and staff). Staff referred to a success culture and there were elements of creative competition among students that were viewed as motivational. Students interviewed confirmed these high expectations and their motivational benefits. In vocational areas high expectations were linked to the development of a strong, work-related, professional ethos. In Hair and Beauty Therapy and Motor Vehicle Engineering, for example, students were expected to behave and work in exactly the same way as if they were employed in a salon or workshop. Staff in these areas had current industrial experience and were very much viewed as professional role models by students. Work experience, either real or simulated, was viewed as an essential part of the learning process.

#### **Individual lecturer initiative**

**At College G** changes had been made in the Motor Vehicle Engineering curriculum delivery area, where the lecturer had high drop-out and low achievement prior to conducting his own review of curriculum delivery. Multimedia assignments had been created based on excellent CD-ROMs and written with PTS software (cost £18,000). The lecturer had also developed key skills assignments using the same software. He believed that college retention and achievement could improve radically with more changes in curriculum delivery along these lines. Retention and achievement in the area in question had improved markedly since these changes.

#### **Key characteristics – design and delivery of curriculum**

- continual adaptation of curriculum portfolio in light of changes in the profile of the student body, and movements in the labour market
- a willingness to withdraw from areas of provision with achievement rates persistently below target
- the availability of a full 'curriculum ladder' allowing progression right the way through from pre-entry to Level 4 and above
- a widespread practical awareness of the concept of inclusive learning manifested in differentiated approaches to the needs of individual learners
- a proactive approach to ensuring the take-up of additional learning support by those who required it
- high expectations of students, based on teaching staff who provided good professional role models
- on vocational courses, the integration of related work experience or effective workplace simulation, or both
- coordinated scheduling of coursework to eliminate bottlenecks
- review and adjustment of the timetable in relation to students' other commitments.

## **8 TUTORIAL SYSTEMS AND OTHER SUPPORT MECHANISMS**

#### **Types of tutorial system**

There was a widespread recognition of the central contribution that tutorial systems could make to improving and sustaining student retention and achievement. Tutors were seen as a vital personal link with individual students, able to keep a regular check on their academic progress and personal circumstances, and to help ensure that any problems were confronted and dealt with should they arise. Five of the colleges (Colleges C, H, E, I and J) had either recently reformed their tutorial arrangements, or were in the purpose of doing so, in order to strengthen the level of support to students. At Colleges D and F, there was considerable school and faculty level autonomy in tutorial arrangements, and systems and level of support varied.

A typical feature of such reforms – as at College J – was some redefinition of the tutors' role to place greater emphasis on monitoring academic progress and

achievement, and making early intervention in the event of absence or problems in completing coursework successfully. There was now more recognition of the need to stretch students. The tutorial curriculum was timetabled, tutorial sessions included in the teaching and learning lesson observation cycle, and tutor records audited.

At College B, the students were timetabled for two hours of tutorial support each week. Wherever possible, the tutorial role was allocated to members of staff who regularly taught the students for whom they had responsibility, so that a close and familiar relationship was possible. Weekly reporting via an electronic registration system enabled tutors to check on punctuality and absence. Tutors met with management every fortnight to discuss operational issues and each tutor had a designated support manager to whom they could refer daily. At College C, tutors typically delivered one hour per week of group tutorials, one hour of individual tutorial, and half an hour of key skills tracking.

There was a range of evidence of general improvements in the ability to detect students' needs for additional learning support, and to make a variety of flexible arrangements for its provision. Securing and sustaining take-up was a persistent problem, however, especially among some of those most in need.

In part, the review and strengthening of tutorial arrangements was driven by a consciousness of the proportionately greater needs that became apparent when participation was widened successfully. Staff at College G, for example, were conscious of operating against a background of the highest school exclusion rates in the country. Increasing proportions of adult students, too, needed considerable monitoring and support if they were to acquire the necessary study skills. Though motivated to learn, some adult students reacted adversely to the thought of formal assessment, and this issue had to be dealt with sensitively if they were to gain the qualifications towards which they, ostensibly, were studying. At College H there were now earlier and more frequent interventions in the event of absence or failure to complete coursework, but several staff expressed worries about the difficulty of balancing confrontation with sympathy for the personal circumstances of some students.

More generally, effective tutoring was seen to require high levels of judgement and inter-personal skills. The involvement of greater numbers of staff in tutorial responsibilities therefore had considerable implications for recruitment, training and development. There were a number of examples where colleges were giving particular attention to these issues. At College J, tutorial policy was supported by a whole-college training programme, including at community outreach sites. A Personal Tutor Development Group had been established to provide continuing support and development, including an up-to-date resource manual. At College C there was a short induction programme for all newly appointed tutors, plus a voluntary Counselling Skills for Tutors course spread over three half days. During 1999, College F mounted a major cross-college staff development programme for tutoring skills in line with the implementation of strategic priorities.

### **Revisions to assessment procedures**

**At College C**, there were approximately 13,000 ESOL enrolments per year. Achievement rates had been poor, as students did not want to be assessed. Under new arrangements students who were afraid of tests were assessed unobtrusively. Assessors examined their work and matched it against performance criteria for a college-based OCN qualification. In this way most students now achieved.

### **Changes in the tutorial system**

**At College H**, the tutorial system was in the process of changing. In future, all students would have an additional one-to-one tutorial once a term in order to look at attendance and punctuality. Tutors would track both academic progress and provide pastoral care. Staff development had taken place. Lecturers felt the attitude towards tutorials was changing in the college in the light of a recent Inspection report. There was now more of an interface between tutors and students and more staff were intervening with regard to student absence and late assignment work.

## **Target setting and action planning**

Evidence is growing that student motivation can be stimulated and harnessed to great effect if challenging but achievable academic targets are set for students individually, and progress monitored regularly against them. The use of value added measures to predict eventual examination grades based on GCSE point scores has had notable impact in raising the achievement on many A-level courses. It also appears that such approaches could be transferable to GNVQ qualifications, even though the correlations between input and output measures are less pronounced than with A-levels (Martinez 2001).

Unsurprisingly, the two sixth form colleges within the Stage 2 sample (Colleges A and B) were making use of ALIS (A-Level Information System) to set A-level grade targets – in the former case typically at a grade higher than that predicted! Students at both colleges spoke positively about the way such targets made for a constructive relationship with their tutors and helped in sustaining their motivation. Value added approaches were also being piloted at Colleges C, I and J. At College E students on some programmes were involved in major termly progress reviews with their tutors, incorporating student self-assessments agreed with, and validated by, their tutor. Follow-up action plans were then required.

### **Individual target-setting using ALIS**

**At College B**, students spoke very positively about the relationship established with their tutors who helped them to set achievement targets, using ALIS. 'The teachers help you to realise your potential: help is always there if you're willing to take it.' Most courses were modular so external assessment enabled regular feedback to be given and students 'had real targets to aim for'.

### **Portfolio development**

**At College E**, Motor Vehicle students finished each day with a tutorial session that was specifically used to develop portfolios and to review the learning that the students had achieved that day. Students were wholly supportive of this integrated approach, which seemed to have proved successful in demystifying portfolio building for them.

## **Other support**

Though having more immediate relevance to maintaining retention than to improving academic performance, Student Services were generally viewed as having a key role to play. Several colleges had striven to develop closer links between tutors and Student Services with beneficial effect. Tutors were one of the most effective means of communicating to students the range and nature of available support (especially financial help) so that take-up was optimised. They also played a leading role in minimising any perceived stigma attached to the need to receive support. Equally, there was evidence that, where personal problems were concerned, students preferred not to deal with a member of staff with whom they had a day-to-day relationship on academic matters. Hence the need for effective liaison between the two functions.

Specific aspects of Student Services were seen as particularly effective in sustaining retention and achievement while widening participation. At College I, for instance, the provision of 140 daily childcare places was seen as a major step forward. The well-developed Student Services function at College F supported students in a number of ways. It administered the College Access Fund, which supported students directly through grants, and indirectly through the purchasing of equipment – for example, hairdressing kit. Students were generally expected also to make a notional contribution themselves. Student counselling was provided by an external agency and support was offered on a fixed term, sessional basis so as to discourage dependency.

### ***Key characteristics – tutorial and other support***

- regular review of students' academic progress and personal circumstances, individually as well as in groups
- the negotiation with individual students of targets and action plans to achieve them, making use of value added systems wherever possible
- close links between tutors and teaching staff
- pro-active referral to flexible systems of additional learner support, wherever necessary
- close liaison between tutors and Student Services, and other sources of support on non-academic matters
- rigorous systems for the selection, training and appraisal of staff with tutorial responsibilities.

## **9 TEACHING AND PEDAGOGY**

### **Course review mechanisms**

College Quality Assurance (QA) systems and procedures for self-assessment generally encompassed regular course review. The main emphasis tended to be on the requirement for remedial action plans from course leaders and course teams where rates of retention and achievement fell below a pre-determined threshold, and where there were no obvious causes lying outside the influence of the staff concerned. Regular monitoring of progress against targets was also undertaken, and improved MIS was enabling management teams to identify potential problems and intervene to tackle them at an early stage. Student feedback was also typically taken into account within these processes.

Less apparent was the rigorous application of such procedures across all courses. Teaching staff interviewees in a number of the colleges felt systems were applied inconsistently, and hard evidence of the direct impact of QA arrangements on teaching and learning practice was not always easy to find.

There were some examples of reforms in course review procedures and other innovative approaches that appeared to be having a positive impact. At College C, for instance, all quality systems were reviewed and redesigned following the appointment of a new Head Of Quality. Termly achievement reviews were introduced, with performance checked against national benchmarks using three-year trends. Areas for action were then identified, and the Head of Quality was charged with monitoring their implementation. Annual self-assessment reviews were also undertaken. Teaching methods were being reviewed, and all students undertook a diagnosis of their learning styles to inform this process. College J had introduced a Meeting Our Targets (MOT) system that emphasised continual improvement. Among its features it involved the analysis of the 50 courses with the best retention and achievement rates so that successful strategies could be identified and spread to other courses. At College A, major changes to teaching approaches in Mathematics in the light of poor rates of retention and achievement had been introduced by a newly appointed Head of Department. At College I, grades resulting from lesson observations were now made available to course teams (in an anonymised form), with a view to encouraging more focused remedial action plans.

#### **Course quality record holders**

At College E, each course had a designated course quality record holder responsible for the completion of a range of course documentation and data in the quality portfolio. This included a course review and evaluation together with the development of a course action plan. In turn, this informed the self-assessment process, which was located at curriculum department level. Quality coordinators had recently been introduced at curriculum department level in order to monitor and support completion of course quality records. The college's SMT had noted the need for more detailed monitoring of course quality and action plans.

## **Classroom observation and staff development**

A number of the colleges had placed a major emphasis on classroom observation, linked to appraisal and individually tailored programmes of staff development. The staff development officer at College C regarded the transformation of teaching quality from 'adequate' to 'good' as the single most effective way of improving the performance of students. In order to work, though, these arrangements required the confidence of the large majority of staff to whom they were applied. This was unlikely to be achieved unless all those who were employed to do the observing were highly trained for the task, and seen to be authoritative by those they observed. Ensuring that this was the case consumed considerable time and resources. At some of the colleges, management teams considered that the defensiveness of staff about the process (perhaps understandable) had diluted its effectiveness in identifying and tackling remedial needs. At others there was no explicit reference to student retention and achievement within the criteria for staff appraisal.

On the whole, the schemes in place seemed to be much more assiduous at identifying and dealing with problem areas than they were at learning from 'best practice'. Many of the teaching staff who were interviewed were not aware of any formal systems of sharing practice within their own colleges.

In general, the features of the best-developed schemes appeared to be:

- a rigorous lesson observation system applied regularly and consistently across all teaching staff
- the utilisation of teaching observation reports
- a culture of continual improvement, rather than apportionment of blame, with an emphasis on individually-tailored development programmes for *all* staff involved, irrespective of their level of competence
- close monitoring of the implementation of development programmes, with support for staff whose teaching performance was judged as inadequate
- identification and dissemination of effective practice, in addition to that in need of remedial action.

### **Increasing rigour of observation**

**At College C**, the observation system had been tightened, with automatic follow-up on staff receiving an observation grade of 4 or 5, or even a low 3. Remedial work was expected from the staff pending re-inspection, and the whole process was now linked with appraisal.

### **Observation and continuous professional development**

**At College D**, every member of staff was observed. They were given feedback and there was an appeals procedure in the event of disagreement. A copy of the report was sent to the personnel manager. The previous appraisal scheme had been replaced with a continuous professional development (CPD) interview, which identified development needs.

**At College J**, identified good practice had been fed into the training provided on lesson observations. A paper with a number of recommendations relating to the observation of teaching had recently gone to Academic Board. This made reference to national quality standards and the need for professional development. Managers at all levels taught. The Professional Development Plan linked to policies and strategies designed to raise achievement – for example, the continued provision of in-house workshops on improving retention and achievement for 16–19 year olds, ongoing training in lesson and tutorial observation, and increasing the number of staff attaining City and Guilds 730 and the Certificate in Education. The Plan also aimed to encourage every teacher to develop teaching practice against FENTO standards, to provide seminars on excellence in teaching and learning, and to fund degrees and masters programmes for specialist staff.

### **Teaching and learning styles**

**At College I** 'achieving quality through continual improvement' was cited as a principle underpinning the achievement of the college mission. This was mainly effected through staff development. The staff development plan continued to include training in a range of teaching and learning styles and strategies and to improve areas of weakness in teaching that have been 'identified through self-assessment'. A small pilot training scheme in differential learning and sharing good practice, which was carried out in 1998, was being extended to all staff. Workshops would be run at all sites. Good practice checklists and a database had been developed in order to promote continual improvement in teaching.

### **Key characteristics – teaching and pedagogy**

- active involvement of teaching staff in course review procedures
- teachers accept appropriate accountability for student achievement
- a rigorous, regular and consistent system of lesson observation
- utilisation of observation reports within agreed systems of staff appraisal
- a culture of continual improvement, supported by individually tailored programmes of continuous professional development
- identification and dissemination of effective practice.

## **10 MONITORING, EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP**

### **Information**

There was general agreement that the timeliness, accuracy and usefulness of retention and achievement data provided from colleges' central MIS had improved over time. This had resulted both in raising awareness of staff, and in enabling better targeted intervention to take place at an early stage. In most cases, though, there was still some way to go, and there were many examples of additional records being maintained at departmental level because central systems were still seen as incapable of producing data with sufficient speed or accuracy, or in the most helpful format.

The systems that were best regarded by management and staff seemed to be those that used college intranet systems to provide data online in a user-friendly format, allowing access and interrogation by individual members of course teams. Records could be updated daily, so that a high level of currency was maintained provided there were no delays in data input. Monitoring could therefore be undertaken on the basis of the latest information, enabling potential problems to be identified and acted upon before they grew too serious.

Even with the most sophisticated MIS, though, any positive impact upon student achievement depended upon action being taken on the basis of the information provided. The point was frequently made by interviewees that problems were known of at course team level before they were spotted in MIS reports, but were not always tackled as early or as thoroughly as would be desirable because of other pressures.

#### **User-friendly MIS**

**At College C** the data obtainable from MIS is now of high quality – the college's FEFC Inspector regarded it as good as he had ever seen. The format was user-friendly and was updated every 24 hours. It was the role of HoDs to identify problem areas. Prior to the installation of the improved system, data on retention and achievement had not been presented in a user-friendly format, and staff therefore made little use of it. This had now been changed and the intranet MIS format was used effectively. Responding to weaknesses was now a priority.

#### **Accuracy and timeliness**

**At College E** problems remained in the provision of accurate and timely MIS data against which to monitor and plan. There were many instances of discrepancies between course level data and MIS data. Some managers had found ways of resolving this difficulty using locally generated data. Others however, were not able to challenge the inaccuracy of MIS data with their own figures. Major efforts were now being made to ensure the availability of accurate data, so as to give greater impetus to monitoring retention and achievement and the use of internal and external benchmarking.

**At College J** accurate MIS was recognised as vital to the whole process of monitoring and improving retention and achievement. High priority had been given to refining systems and making data regularly available to course teams. This priority extended to the examinations section, the staff there seeing themselves as a professional team supporting quality assurance.

## **Follow-up of absence and coursework problems**

There was widespread agreement that punctuality and attendance – especially in the case of younger students – were accorded much more importance than had usually been the case in the past. There was also a consensus that the adoption of 'tough love' policies in these areas had led to improvements in staying-on rates, sometimes markedly so. Immediate follow-up of unexplained absence of 16–19 year olds was commonplace, and parents were frequently involved where problems had occurred. While the 'adult atmosphere' of colleges was an attractive feature for many young students, it had come to be accepted that many of them benefited from a significant level of order and direction, particularly early on in their studies. For this reason, also, there were a number of cases where timetabling had been tightened, with directed self-study replacing the concept of 'free periods'.

Understandably, perhaps, worries persisted among some interviewees about the difficulty of combining even-handedness with sensitivity to individual circumstances, and also over the stage at which it became appropriate to have recourse to disciplinary procedures. It was noticeable, though, that retention and achievement rates were often at their highest within any one college where the routines of a real workplace were reproduced, and a strong professional work ethic had been established.

Likewise in the case of problems with academic workload and assessments, there was widespread evidence of careful monitoring of individual progress, linked to the provision of additional learning support. Here, examples were also seen of the use of MIS to identify problems that seemed to affect an unusual number of students on the same course, perhaps because of avoidable bottlenecks in the scheduling of coursework. There was general agreement that, once a backlog of coursework had built up, the students affected were much more likely to withdraw from their studies before completion.

### **Attendance chasers and homework club**

**At College C** there was a system of '*Attendance Chasers*': students were paid to do this and tutors did it routinely. Students were encouraged to provide mobile as well as home contact phone numbers. On three evenings a week, starting at 4.30 pm, there was a staffed homework club, common to the entire curriculum area, so mixing students at Levels 1, 2 and 3. After successful piloting in one department, it had been implemented across college. Almost 10% of students made use of it on any given day. Most made use of it at some time or other. It was very popular with the students, who helped each other. Staff requested students to attend where this was considered necessary, but students could self-refer. The club was used least in the first few weeks, but soon caught on.

### **Attendance and coursework monitoring**

**At College G**, student attendance was monitored and was discussed at tutorial reviews. All parents of 16–19 year olds were contacted if students did not arrive in college by 11.30 am. Parents were also contacted if students were not producing assignments. In the IT section, 16–19 year olds were rung by phone as soon as a session was missed and a signing in system was operated. As a consequence, 16–19 attendance had risen from 60% to 80% since the previous year.

### **Learning advisers and retention officers**

**At College I**, lead learning advisers had been established to work with tutors to improve course placements and monitor 'at risk' students. Site-based retention officers had also been appointed to follow up students and liaise with course teams. Periodic retention reports were produced, which course teams were required to analyse. Heads of faculty then reported to SMT and action was taken if appropriate. Curriculum quality procedures had also been revised. These included a course review checklist, the outcomes of which fed into the self-assessment report. The revisions were being supported by a whole college staff development day.

### **Key characteristics – *monitoring, evaluation and follow-up***

- MIS capable of providing accurate and up-to-date information on retention and achievement, down to course level and by individual student, and in a user-friendly format
- readily available online access to MIS on the part of managers and teaching staff
- all staff trained in accessing, interrogating and making use of MIS data
- clearly stated policies on attendance and punctuality, with immediate follow-up of unexplained absence
- culture of student obligations as well as entitlements
- early identification of problems caused by outside pressures, and offer of support
- direction and programming of self-study time, especially in the case of younger students
- involvement of parents or other family members in sustaining student support.

## **11 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **Demographic influences on achievement**

Demographic differences in student profiles clearly have an impact upon the relative rates of student achievement recorded by different colleges. Generally speaking, there is a negative correlation between measures of deprivation and overall rates of achievement. Having said this, in itself the demographic make-up of student bodies does *not* appear to be capable of explaining the major part of inter-institutional variations in achievement. Colleges with the lowest rates of student achievement are below average primarily because their rates are lower for *all* their students, not because they have higher than average proportions in categories associated with below average achievement – even though the latter is usually also the case. Nor is there any evidence that we have been able to identify that the remaining differences in college achievement rates are connected to any marked degree to variations in students' prior attainments, or in the numbers of qualifications for which they are entered.

The profiles of student bodies, as recorded in the ISR, do not tell the full demographic story, as we have acknowledged. Deprivation affects individual students in ways that the ISR cannot measure, even indirectly. It has also been

postulated that demands on college capabilities grow disproportionately with the volumes of student deprivation with which they have to deal, with consequential effects on achievement. However, initial analysis of student bodies by postcode – the best currently available single indicator of overall deprivation – reveals no evidence that deprivation has a significant impact on achievement over and above that revealed by ISR comparisons. The relationship between achievement rates and the percentages of students from postcodes that trigger the WP uplift is weak, as revealed by a number of high achieving colleges that have student profiles comprised overwhelmingly of students who trigger the uplift. The line of best fit suggests that for every additional 10% of total student numbers that trigger the uplift, overall achievement rates fall by around 3% (1997–98 data) or less (1998–99). Even if the correlation were strong, though, on this basis it would not account for the bulk of the inter-institutional achievement gap.

A further possibility is that the ethnic mix of student bodies can influence achievement rates in ways additional to those accounted for by variations in the ISR. It is certainly the case that, on the whole, colleges with the higher levels of achievement are those with the smaller proportions of students drawn from minority ethnic groups. But as we have pointed out, such students also have relatively higher levels of achievement at the colleges in question. As with deprivation, at present we have no hard statistical evidence that demands on colleges grow disproportionately with the numbers of students from minority ethnic groups, with consequential effects on overall achievement rates. This is not to deny any deleterious effects of racism, negative stereotyping and the like, but simply to query why their impact on the achievement of individual students should vary in this way. Racism would appear to be no less common in parts of the country where the minority ethnic presence within student bodies is very small, and where there are fewer peer group support mechanisms to help its victims to cope.

Having said this, there may be inter-institutional differences in the socio-economic profiles of the same minority ethnic groups or in the extent to which English is a first language, or both, which are not readily apparent from the ISR. These might help to explain some of the remaining achievement gap.

In summary, therefore, demographic variations appear to account at most for no more than half of the inter-institutional differences in student achievement, according to the measures currently available. This suggests that *all* high WP colleges with overall achievement rates below the average for that group should be capable of improving them to the current median level, at the very least. Further investigations of the influences of deprivation and ethnicity are needed, though, before we can fully exclude the possibility that they could also explain a significant element of the remaining achievement gap.

## Institutional performance

On the basis of our examination of the demographic evidence, therefore, our supposition is that a substantial part of the achievement gap must stem from factors that lie within the direct influence of colleges – that is, as a result of differences in institutional ethos, systems, procedures and practices that affect student performance. Evidence already assembled concerning influences on student retention, together with the reports from the FEFC Inspectorate, and from the National Audit Office, supports this hypothesis. Colleges with low achievement rates are by no means confined to those serving areas of high deprivation – several with average or low deprivation student profiles display achievement rates that are well within the bottom quartile. Furthermore, year-on-year improvements have generally been most pronounced among the colleges with the lower achievement rates – a pattern that is consistent with the hypothesis that a significant element of student achievement is directly susceptible to college-level interventions.

Our study of 10 colleges that formed Stage 2 of this project suggests that, in general and taking account of the variations in the profiles of the student bodies, those with the better performance in terms of overall achievement rates during the period 1996–99 had for whatever reason made the improvement of retention and achievement a major strategic priority at an earlier stage and had been more successful at embedding a culture of continual improvement at all levels. In these cases there was evidence extending over a longer period of:

- the high priority accorded to raising student achievement within the college strategic plan
- regular consideration of the issue by the SMT and governing body
- the establishment of achievement targets, against which progress was monitored, and the use of benchmarks
- effective communication to staff of the central importance of raising student achievement
- a culture of high expectations of both staff and students
- the allocation of responsibility and authority at curriculum leader and course team level
- regular monitoring and action planning via face-to-face meetings between managers and staff
- encouragement of bottom-up initiatives within a college-wide strategy framework
- review of teacher performance, supported by tailored staff development.

Otherwise, though, there was no clearly obvious pattern that linked differences in college ethos and practice to variations in their achievement rates. In coming to this conclusion, we note:

- the difficulty of making due allowance for any disproportionate impacts of merger and restructuring that affected some of the colleges concerned
- the variations in achievement rates within as well as between colleges
- the more stringent highlighting of problem areas for retention and achievement in the second round of FEFC Inspections
- most importantly, the changes that a number of the Stage 2 colleges had put in place since the last (1998–99) 'official' set of achievement figures.

We have seen that, nationally, colleges with below average achievement have been helping to 'close the achievement gap' by improving their position at a relatively faster rate. The same trend appeared to be apparent within the group of 10 colleges that we visited. Though we cannot tell for certain that it will be continued when the fully audited figures for subsequent years become available, there was every sign of a generally high level of commitment to improving student achievement, at least on the part of management teams and governing bodies. As we have noted in the preceding sections of this report, a number of the most interesting innovations are now in place colleges with the greatest cause for concern about their achievement rates.

### Raising student achievement

Despite the absence of clear links between specific interventions at college level, and precisely predictable impacts on student achievement, we have found it possible to arrive at some measure of consensus concerning effective improvement strategies. In combination, the reports of the consultants, based on the opinions of the managers, teaching staff and students whom they had interviewed, identified a number of key characteristics where confidence levels in their effectiveness appeared to be highest, as summarised at the end of each of the preceding sections 4–10 of this report.

### The way forward

No one college, of course, can be said to excel in all the key characteristics that we have identified. Equally, there is unlikely to be a college that is totally devoid of effective practice, and there are signs of the spread of more consistent approaches to quality improvement. Some areas remain less developed than others, though:

- MIS, where despite improvements there is still a wide gap between the best practice and the level of development that is typical
- changes in course delivery in response to the more rigorous identification of retention and achievement problem areas.; in particular, the concepts of inclusive learning still have some way to go before they are likely to impact fully on the majority of students
- sharing and learning from effective practice: currently, colleges seem much better attuned to identifying weaknesses and acting upon them, than in building on their own points.

Our main findings are consistent with others arising from research undertaken by the Learning and Skills Development Agency. Readers are recommended to refer to the list of references that follows for publications containing this evidence, as well as guidance on improvement strategies.

The ways in which student achievement can be raised most effectively remain a complex issue. More work is required to understand fully the aspects in which demographic factors act as barriers before we can be certain that their impact is not greater than we believe on the basis of the evidence currently available. At present though, it appears that the efforts at college level are already bringing about a

noticeable narrowing in the inter-institutional achievement gap. As we have indicated, such efforts are by no means straightforward, and place considerable demands upon colleges. Ultimately, though, we believe that it ought to be possible to reduce the achievement gap to half its present size, or less.

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